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SUBJECT: THAI PRIME MINISTER RATTLED BY CRITICS OF SOUTHERN SECURITY ZONING POLICY?

REF: A) BANGKOK 1280 B) BANGKOK 1233

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Clarke, Reason: 1.4 (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra initially reacted to critics of his new security zoning policy in Southern Thailand (Ref A) with a blast of vulgar expletives. But strong and spreading negative public reaction to his new plan, coupled with an invigorated media focus on continuing southern violence, and questioning of heavy-handed tactics from NGOs, academics, and Privy Counselor General Surayud Chulanont, appear to have tempered Thaksin's response. Thaksin announced he will send a team of 25 Thai Rak Thai (TRT) members of Parliament to the deep South (Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces) to explore ways to address problems the crisis. After an audience with the King on February 22, he also called for a special joint session of Parliament in late March to discuss the South. END SUMMARY.

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION NETWORK OBJECTS TO SOUTHERN ZONING PLAN

¶12. (U) PM Thaksin's plan, announced February 16, to establish a security zoning system in the deep South and cut off government development and other funding for "red" zone villages (Ref A), has provoked immediate and sustained criticism. On February 20, the Peace and Reconciliation Network, a group of academics led by the respected human rights activist Professor Gothom Arya, released a public letter asking the Prime Minister to reconsider the zoning policy. The Network's letter stated that the policy would inflame already heightened tensions between the local people and the government, especially the security forces. Noting that mixing development issues with security policy had proved to be a failure in other countries with similar problems, the Network suggested that the RTG take a more public and participatory approach with the affected communities to resolve problems. In Bangkok, an Assumption University poll conducted February 17-19 indicated that 63% of those polled objected to the zoning proposal in the South, while only 28% agreed with it. Only 38% expressed faith in the government's overall handling of the southern situation.

THAKSIN INITIALLY DISMISSES CRITICS WITH HARSH WORDS

¶13. (C) On February 21, PM Thaksin, displaying again his low tolerance for public criticism, delivered a lengthy tirade about critics of his southern security policies. In response to questions from local reporters, Thaksin, said: "That group of academics, they hit at me and hit at me, but never make any constructive suggestions." He called into question their patriotism and further described them using a highly pejorative reference in Thai, "meng". (Comment: The term, in colloquial Thai comes from "mae meung" or literally, "your mother". It is widely understood -- including by those for whom it was meant -- to mean "motherf...ers". End Comment). Many media commentators and academics immediately pointed out that such language should not be used by the PM in public discourse about such an important and sensitive subject. Thaksin's use of the term made big news in Thailand, where politeness and proper speech, especially in public, are of paramount importance, but also because a slip of the tongue by the PM on national TV makes for a good story.

¶14. (C) Sunai Phasuk, an advisor to Human Rights Watch Asia and a prominent local human rights activist commented, "It's unfortunate that instead of listening, the Prime Minister reacts too quickly with no consideration of our feedback." He said that civil society groups will use both academics and the media to put the ball back in the PM's court to come up with a sensible solution to the South. He and others are alarmed that as a result of the general election and Thai Rak Thai's losses in the deep south, Thaksin now sees everyone "down there" as his enemy. (Comment: Sunai's observations are especially notable when considering Thaksin's statements on February 19 in his first weekly radio address since the election. At that time he characterized southern "separatists" as "that group" using the Thai word "mun", another relatively harsh derogatory word for public discourse, and usually used to refer to animals or objects. Thaksin has used these terms before to refer to "the separatists" or "bandits", but it is worrisome that his frustration appears to be escalating. Nobody has forgotten

how his harsh public rhetoric in the 2003 anti-narcotics campaign created a climate that lent itself to the subsequent upsurge in extra-judicial killings. End Comment.)

BUT ZONING PLAN CRITICS MULTIPLY

15. (SBU) Outside of Bangkok, objections to Thaksin's zoning plan have also been strong. Muslim community leaders in the South have rejected it openly, warning that it will create further tensions. In significant public comments on February 21, General Surayud Chulanont, a member of the King's Privy Council (and former military Supreme Commander and Army Commander-in-Chief), responded to the zoning plan by publicly describing his personal observations during tours to the South accompanying the son of King Bhumibol, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. He said he had heard firsthand of villagers' perceived sense of injustice at the hands of the government and was quoted in The Nation newspaper as warning that the southern separatist insurgency could grow to rival the 1970s communist movement if not handled properly. "This matter is sensitive. People might think they are being segregated. If this feeling is abused it's like throwing oil onto a fire." (Comment: Surayud's remarks echo private statements about the South to the Ambassador on February 16, per Ref B. It should also be remembered that Surayud has a history of differences with Thaksin, also recounted in part in Ref B. End Comment.)

THAKSIN MODIFIES POLITICAL HANDLING OF ZONING PLAN, WITHOUT ABANDONING IT

16. (C) The strong opposition appeared to give PM Thaksin second thoughts about the deep South security zoning plan, although he has not discarded it. He announced that he would meet later this week with Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and Professor Surichai Wankaew, a noted political science professor at Chulalongkorn University for consultations on the southern crisis. Then he announced that he would send a special team of 25 TRT members of Parliament to the South for three months. Their mission would be to meet with locals, discuss their grievances, and seek new answers. This idea met with widespread skepticism. On February 22, after the Tuesday Cabinet meeting, PM Thaksin had an audience with the King. Without any reference to that Royal audience, Thaksin called for the Thai Parliament to hold a special joint session on March 30-31 to discuss the southern situation. The idea of calling this type of joint session, which has been rarely convened, and only in times of national crisis, had been mooted earlier in the week by Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Democrat Party (DP) politician, former foreign minister, scholar of the South, and a Muslim.

17. (C) COMMENT: It was clear in the first few days after his landslide electoral victory that Thaksin was feeling unusually confident. However, his brashness in announcing the security zoning plan as the next step in addressing the southern violence, Thailand's number one domestic issue, without any consultations (and before he had even officially been re-selected as prime minister), surprised even his diehard critics. He himself may, in turn, have been taken aback by the vehemence of the opposition to the zoning idea. Aside for the "usual suspects" (one of his milder dismissive terms), he quickly heard clear cautions from General Surayud, which may also reflect sentiments held by others in the Privy Council, a power base he cannot ignore. Thaksin may also have received a signal of displeasure from the King, although this is conjecture thus far supported only by the timing of his audience and the subsequent announcement of the special joint session of Parliament at the end of March. It is not yet clear whether Thaksin has abandoned the security zoning plan, or is simply executing a tactical retreat in order to better sell it politically. The joint session of Parliament could give him cover for following through with the plan or for a face-saving dropping of it. END COMMENT.

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